

The Voice of the Soviet Village

By ANNA LOUISE STRONG*

THERE is no fixed day for Soviet elections; an announcement from Moscow, modified by each province, fixes the date within a certain week or ten-day period. It is only necessary that a village election be finished in time for the incoming Soviet to take part in the provincial elections, which in turn must be held in time to send delegates to the All-Union Congress of Soviets. The whole process has to be completed in about six weeks in order that the great Congress may act swiftly on the mandates received from factory and village. Remote districts in Northern Siberia whose delegates take two months to travel to Moscow must naturally elect them earlier. Fishing fleets that put out for cruises into the Winter Arctic choose their Deputies before they sail.

In Gulinka, a village overnight by train from Moscow plus a two-hour walk through the mud, there was no reason for rushing the election. But Maria Kurkina, the village President, thought the holidays on the anniversary of the Revolution offered an excellent chance to hold both an election and an Old Home Week. "We are rather a backward village," she said. "We have only a four-year school and frightful roads and no electricity yet. But we've stirred up in these past four years a lot of public spirit that is

ready for great achievements. Most of us have not seen the world and don't know the many things there are to get. Yet from our backward Gulinka no less than fifty people have gone to honorable tasks in our Soviet country—some engineers, an army commander, a doctor, a surveyor, an assistant editor, the foreman of the marten ovens in Stalingrad, many promising students and several other notables. Let us invite them to tell us what is this Soviet power and what it offers. Let them tell us the shortcomings of our Gulinka, that we may know how to instruct our Deputies; then we shall be behind nobody in all new blessings there are to acquire."

Every one in the village thought the idea splendid, and as there was no opposing voice President Kurkina went to the township election commission and asked that commissioners be sent to see that Gulinka's election was held properly. "All your grain deliveries in?" asked the township commission. "Potato deliveries too? No village campaigns unfinished? No work which the outgoing Soviet has still to do? Then hold it when you like; it's your affair. Have you made your report yet?" "Made it and printed it, and every one has discussed it," Kurkina replied proudly, producing a neat little folder, *My Report to the Voters*. Such reports, though not always printed, are made by all Soviet officials to their constituents. The reports, telling how the instructions given at the previous election have been carried out, must be discussed at least a week before the voting so

*The author is associate editor of the *Moscow Daily News*, the first newspaper in English to be published in the Soviet Union. Since this article was written it has been decided to amend the Soviet Constitution by substituting direct for indirect elections, eliminating the inequalities between urban and rural representation, and by instituting the secret ballot.

that the election meeting may confine itself to candidates.

Kurkina's report was homely enough in its details. Nowhere in its sixteen printed pages did she brag of her own work; nowhere did she ask for votes. She told of great improvements in the village and described how they were accomplished.

"During your daily work you hardly notice how life is changing," President Kurkina's report began. "But when you look back to sum up these four years you note a very great difference in our life, our village and our people. Many new brick houses replace the broken huts. A radio central receiver gives Moscow concerts to our homes. Outside the village great brick structures are rising—the stables, barns and granaries of our collective farms. Cottage windows that formerly frightened one by their blackness are bright with flowers and white curtains. People also are changing. The children of former farmhands become doctors, engineers, commanders.

"I am a woman. I know the old priests' proverb: 'A chicken is not a bird; a woman is not a person.' Four years ago when you elected me, men met me on the road with grins. Even to my face they told me that I could do nothing. 'That solid man, Peter Zhitov, can't run this village and you, a woman, try!' I wept sometimes from the insults and thought of giving up entirely. But I remembered Lenin's word that every kitchen maid must learn to rule the State. That applied to me, for I worked from the age of 12 as cowherd and later as kitchen girl at General Solomon's. And I said: 'Who will ever make over this old life unless we ourselves do it?'"

Then Kurkina told of her first failures, when the kulaks packed the village meetings and cut the taxes

and grain deliveries to the point where no cultural activity could grow. Her first light came from the township secretary who told her: "You'll never do it alone. Organize active ones around you who want things for the village." Kurkina had organized seventy-eight such "active ones"; one-eighth of the 612 adult voters of Gulinka were doing volunteer government work on village committees. There were five sections of village work—farming, livestock, culture, roads and finance. Kurkina listed them all and mentioned those of the village soviet who had handled them and what the "active ones" had done.

The Farm Section had conducted farming courses in each of the three hamlets that together make the village. It had introduced wheat sowing, which now gave a crop of twenty-four bushels per acre. The village had been reorganized into three collective farms, comprising 208 of its farming families, only eighteen "unorganized peasants" being left.

"No horse in our whole village is underfed and most are very well fed," continued Kurkina, giving the result of the Livestock Section's campaigns. She noted the increase of pigs from 32 to 207 and of sheep from 895 to 1,087 through the "special Stalin drive." Horses had increased and were going to increase faster. "Never has there been such good attention to servicing the mares, and we are now able to release them from work when they are in foal."

The Culture Section counted a well-repaired school and a new library of 600 books among its recent achievements and 514 newspapers taken by the 226 families. Besides these there were eighty-eight children's newspapers. "Our dramatic club gave thirty-five performances; our choral club got first prize in the township com-

petition; our stringed orchestra took part in the provincial competition and won honorable mention." The Culture Section had also directed the young people in a campaign for clean houses and "already we have villagers whose homes have rugs, upholstered chairs, wardrobes, flowers and curtains; 150 houses have been whitewashed."

Roads were still bad, but an old pontoon bridge had been replaced by a solid bridge and about a mile of new road had been built to the next village. "Finance" was strong. Kurkina had received a special diploma from the Central Commission for Assisting State Credit. An active corps of twenty-one volunteers, each attached to ten households, had collected taxes and loan subscriptions so well that "in four years no one in our village has been fined for delays in payment."

This homely chronicle concluded with the village children who had gone "into the great expanse of our Socialist fatherland, doing useful work. Who would have thought that children of farmhands could become engineers and commanders? Who would have dreamed that all this could happen to Gulinka?"

The 22-year-old editor of the *Tractor*, the newspaper issued by the nearby Tractor Station which supplied Gulinka and a score of the other villages with tractors, machines, farm courses and general information, featured "Gulinka People" in a whole page of anecdotes and pictures. He was a clever youth who knew how to pick his stories. He pried into the old church records for ancestors and brought them out for contrasts. "The peasant of Lord Ertov, orthodox in faith—his grandsons are now three engineers." "The serf-woman of Golovin, listed thus by the church, produced descendants of whom Sergei is

a land surveyor with university education, and Ivan is studying in the Military Veterinary Institute and Alexander in the Higher Fish Institute of Astrakhan." This was the church four miles from Gulinka which the "political section" of the Tractor Station had made into a theatre for all the villages. The priest had gone away some years ago, and the church remained unused but full of ikons. Then in 1933 the chief of the political section said to the peasants: "Your God has a million churches, and lots of empty ones in these villages; he won't miss an old building like this. But it was built, every kopek, with your own money, and why shouldn't you get some use of it?" More than two-thirds of the "believers" signed the petition, for Soviet laws are strict nowadays against unauthorized diversion of church property if any believers protest. A permit had been received from Moscow to make the building into a theatre.

Home to Gulinka for the holidays came more than twenty of its fifty notables—the foreman of the marten ovens in Stalingrad, students from Leningrad and, most picturesque of all, the ex-criminal Rudniev, who had twenty-five convictions to his discredit till the day when he went to the township police, saying: "I'm a man destroyed, but I want to improve. Send me somewhere to make me over." They sent him to a house of correction, where he became an able mechanic and whence he graduated into honorable work. Later he had married the village doctor, and was now again studying; he would graduate in a year as a full-fledged mechanical engineer. Nobody made a sensation of Rudniev, but he was there as a living example that any one might be "made over," and that the village could also be made over.

At last election day came. Gulinka had 1,269 inhabitants, but an even half of these were children. There were 612 adult electors. Three adults were listed as "deprived of vote"; they were the two old priests and the wife of one of them. Four years earlier when the list of "deprived ones" had been made for the last general election there had been also twelve kulaks and a trader. But the trader had died, the two worst kulaks had been "sent away" and had not returned and the remaining kulaks had redeemed themselves by honest work and were now voters. To replace the fifty who had left the village, 41 boys and girls had reached 18 and were now for the first time voting.

No building in Gulinka could contain all voters. Four sectional meetings were therefore held, three in the outlying hamlets and one in the central school. Each of these assemblies had its list of voters and a number of deputies to elect—one deputy for every group of forty or fifty voters. Thirteen representatives—one for every hundred inhabitants—comprised the village soviet.

The central election assembly in the school was slow in starting; it was called at noon, but by 2 o'clock stragglers were still arriving. Two adjoining rooms, which contained an exhibition from the Moscow Museum of the Revolution, became the centre of the waiting crowds. The woman in charge explained that small traveling exhibits were being sent around to energetic villages, not only to show what existed in Moscow, but also to collect local exhibits and set up local museums.

The meeting grew restless; soon there would be a demand for action. This assembly had a list of 235 voters and only 175 had yet appeared. Worry came into the eyes of Maria Kurkina

under her tan wool shawl. Messengers were sent in all directions. One returned and hope came back to the eyes of President Kurkina. "The workers from the vegetable drying sheds were sent to the wrong meeting," she announced. "They are on their way; that will give us forty more. We shall begin when they get here."

"This is always the slow meeting," grumbled a woman near me. "The farm brigades have easy assemblies, but we have to wait for teachers and doctors and workers from drying sheds and State farms, and all the unorganized individuals."

The workers from the drying sheds arrived, together with a few more individuals. Maria Kurkina and the township representative took their places on the stage. "We have 227 of our 235 electors. We consider that we can proceed with 97 per cent." Relief settles on the gathering; they will not make a record for attendance, but it is an election without scandal.

A presiding officer is elected over the protest of the man proposed for the honor. "We're starting too late," he complains, "and I shall have to leave to bring in the village cows." The order of the day is announced and approved. Seven members of the village soviet and two alternates are to be elected, two members of the auditing commission and two alternates, and the statement of instructions is to be given to the incoming soviet. Maria Kurkina reads the election law whereby all persons over 18 years of age who are engaged in useful labor or who do housework or who are incapacitated for labor may vote. She calls upon all "deprived ones" to leave the meeting; this is formality, for the two old priests and the priest's wife have dropped out of village affairs.

"We now present the list of candidates who have been investigated and recommended by the Gulinka party organization and the Young Communist League," says President Kurkina. She reads a list and checks the scattering applause which has started. "Any more candidates? Speak up! Give us names! Be active!" There is a pause. Under Kurkina's urging a man in the rear arises to respond. He takes the floor and begins a long harangue about his troubles and successes in organizing a collective farm. It is quite clear that he has been drinking to the point of mild befuddlement. His neighbors pull him down, but they do not throw him out of the meeting; he has a right here unless he grows violent.

A man rises: "I think there ought to be a representative from the drying sheds; they have forty workers. And I think the new State farm should be represented." "Candidates, please. Name candidates," says Kurkina. "The committee did not think that the drying sheds have yet developed any special demands aside from the rest of our peasants, but if they have, let them name a candidate." Strunin from the State farm and Sadoviyev from the drying factory are named. "Any more candidates?" persists Kurkina. "Vote, vote, vote," calls the crowd.

"Mihailov first—who has anything to say about Mihailov?" A man says: "Mihailov is a good worker, experienced in our village affairs." Silence falls, broken by the representative of the township election commission. "Hasn't any one in this meeting any opinions? I see you are just dumbly electing him." This annoys them and a group of women dissent with vigorously shaken heads.

"No, not dumbly," protests one of them. "Mihailov did good work on the

roads." Hands are called for. Mihailov gets more than three-fourths of the hands raised. "I wouldn't call them overenthusiastic for you, Comrade Mihailov," says the township representative, "but it seems you are going to get in."

Enthusiasm develops over Menshina, a woman. "I've worked with her three years on all kinds of public work," declares an elector, "and she does everything assigned her energetically and conscientiously. Checking collective farm property, testing seeds, collecting State loans. She works boldly and fights down indifference and backwardness. She also does good productive work in our field brigade, all of whose members want her. [Scattering applause from the field brigade!] Such a member is an asset to our soviet." A regular forest of hands goes up for Menshina. Three times the chairman tries to count them, but even the help of four assistants is not enough to disentangle all the hands in this crowded room. "It will be simpler," he sighs, "if those who didn't vote for Menshina will raise their hands." Two hands go up. "I'm new in this village and don't know Menshina," explains the raiser of one of them.

Pankvashin comes next, recommended by his supporters for "the good work he did in the grain deliveries and in finance," and then Kosarev, of whom they say: "He does well every job assigned him; he's been in the soviet since 1931." Sharkova, the head of the mothers' consultation, is especially pushed by the women. "We need a sanitary expert to clean up this village." Mishutkina is a new candidate, a girl in her early twenties, recommended by the members of her collective farm. "Our best champion; as a volunteer on the commission that investigated the hospital, she listed

its shortcomings better than any member of the soviet." Two speak in glowing praise and a third arises. "Want to criticize Mishutkina?" asks President Kurkina. "No? Well, she's had enough praise. You'll ruin the girl!"

The next candidate meets with criticism. "Claudia has too long a tongue," a man declares. "If she is on the soviet, everything that is done there will be chattered all over the village." "That's good," declares the township representative. "But she tells all the secrets." "We haven't any," announces Kurkina. "She ruins reputations," persists the man. A woman rises: "Claudia is accurate, educated and keeps accounts well. Her tongue is too sharp, but that's no great harm. This village needs some one to wake it up." Claudia gets some three-fourths of the voters; she and Mihailov seem to be the least popular among the candidates.

Then Strunin comes, first of the independent nominees. His sponsor says: "Strunin is head of our brigade on the State farm; under him we got a fine harvest yield." A middle-aged woman rises: "Strunin may get production, but he scares his workers. I know several who left his brigade without waiting for their pay." A murmur of protest rises against Strunin. He gets twenty hands for and twenty-five against; he is defeated, for few people know him. The second independent candidate, manager of the drying sheds, asks permission to withdraw his name. "I'm new and not well known to the village. I don't know why this comrade wants to recommend me. I am not aware of any special demands for the drying sheds." A forest of hands allows him to withdraw without a formal rejection. One wonders whether those nominators were seeking the

favor of their bosses; if so, they did not guess well.

Now come the instructions to the incoming soviet. The visitors and Kurkina have evidently stirred desire for improvements in Gulinka. "To bring our harvest yield up to thirty bushels per acre within two years; to organize a stud farm; to get electricity and radio into every home; to build a House of Culture and a theatre with sound films; to organize a branch of adult education courses from the Tractor Station; to open a House of Sanitation; to start a multi-graphed newspaper; to compile a history of Gulinka; to add a laundry, barber shop and tea shop to the newly opened public bath; to establish a branch veterinary station; to organize a model cooperative store; to organize a skiing team and a football team; to make a landing field for small airplanes so that all the farm campaigns which go by air will come to Gulinka."

"We need a well-equipped fire department," says a man; "and a seven-year school," adds a woman; "and a dentist in our hospital," says the doctor.

The instructions are adopted. They are not formal election pledges; they are the mandate to the new soviet. Thus armed, the soviet is expected to invade township and county and provincial headquarters with "the demands of our voters." They are expected to organize the voters themselves to carry through this program, obtaining help wherever and however they can. Their demands will be pooled in township and provincial elections until the All-Union Congress of Soviets knows how many Gulinkas are demanding electrification and airplanes and how strongly they are prepared to work for their demands.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.